

Heaven: Here and Now

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Leo Tolstoy, like Shakespeare, is one of those literary giants that dominate the landscape of literature so thoroughly that their greatness is beyond debate. We expect great literature to be great art, but one of the most remarkable things about Tolstoy is the vividness and depth of his insights into human nature. It is part of what makes his novels feel so much like real life. Consider this passage from *War and Peace*, where Marya Bolkonsky reflects on a compliment she's just read in a letter from her friend, Julie.

Her eyes, always sad, now looked into the mirror with particular hopelessness. "She's flattering me," thought the princess, and she turned away and went on reading. Julia, however, was not flattering her friend: indeed, the princess's eyes, large, deep, and luminous (sometimes it was as if rays of warm light came from them in sheaves), were so beautiful that very often, despite the unattractiveness of the whole face, those eyes were more attractive than beauty. But the princess had never seen the good expression of those eyes, the expression they had in moments when she was not thinking of herself. As with all people, the moment she looked in the mirror, her face assumed a strained, unnatural, bad expression.

Although it sometimes seems unfair that our friends can see our weaknesses more clearly than we do, Tolstoy points out that sometimes they can see our strengths and virtues more clearly, too.

I had managed to avoid reading any Tolstoy in high school, but came to know him in a different context when I discovered Tolstoy the theologian. A dedicated writer for his first 50 years, Tolstoy experienced a spiritual crisis that led to his conversion to Christianity, radically changing his outlook and approach

to life. Although he chose to follow the teachings of Jesus, it was not a Christianity that most churches would recognize today. He rejected the divinity of Jesus, all miracles and supernaturalism, even the idea of an afterlife at all, much less one that included heaven or hell. These, he believed, could only be found in this life, here on earth.

Tolstoy edited his own version of the New Testament, *The Gospel in Brief*, which focuses on the moral teachings of Jesus, leaving out all the miracles including the resurrection, ending instead with Jesus' death. It is similar to the *Jefferson Bible*, but, unlike Jefferson's version, Tolstoy's reads and flows like literature. I discovered *The Gospel in Brief* when I was 23, and it served for many years as my favorite Christian text. I liked it because, from my point of view, it included everything you needed and left out everything you didn't. I considered myself a "Sermon on the Mount" Christian.

The Sermon on the Mount contains some of the most-quoted and, Tolstoy would argue, the least understood passages in the Gospels: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. . . . You have heard that it was said 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

To this, he added Jesus' rejection of an otherworldly heaven from the book of Luke, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, there it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you."

Tolstoy took this as the title of his book explaining his religious views, *The Kingdom of God Is within You*, subtitled "Christianity not as a mystic religion but as a new theory of life," where he describes the influences that brought him around to his new beliefs. Interestingly, many were Americans, including the

outspoken abolitionist, feminist, and pacifist, William Lloyd Garrison. Another was the Unitarian minister, Adin Ballou. He summarized Ballou's ironic argument for Christian pacifism this way:

“Jesus Christ is my Lord and teacher,” says Ballou in one of his essays exposing the inconsistency of Christians who allowed a right of self-defense and of warfare. “I have promised, leaving all else, to follow him, through good and through evil, to death itself. But I am a citizen of the democratic republic of the United States; and in allegiance it I have sworn to defend the constitution of my country, if need be, with my life.

“Jesus Christ forbids me to resist evil doers, and to take from them an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, bloodshed for bloodshed, and life for life.

“My government demands from me quite the opposite, and bases a system of self-defense on gallows, musket, and sword, to be used against its foreign and domestic foes. And the land is filled accordingly with gibbets, prisons, arsenals ships of war, and soldiers.

“In the maintenance and use of these expensive appliances for murder, we can very suitably exercise to the full the virtues of forgiveness to those who injure us, love toward our enemies, blessings to those who curse us, and doing good to those who hate us. For we have a succession of Christian priests to pray for us and beseech the blessing of Heaven on the holy work of slaughter.

“It is the truest means of forgiving injuries and loving enemies. If we only do it in the spirit of love, nothing can be more Christian than such murder.”

If Tolstoy were alive today, he would probably agree with the current sound-byte version of this: “When Jesus said to love your enemies, he probably didn't mean to kill them.”

So pervasive is this distortion of Christianity that, according to Tolstoy, both believers and non-believers misunderstand this point. He says that the problem is that both sides are blinded by what they already believe. Here he exhibits some of his fine grasp of human nature and of language, writing, “Even the strongest current of water cannot add a drop to a cup which is already full. The most difficult subjects can be explained to the most slow-witted man if he has not formed any idea of them already; but the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of doubt, what is laid before him.”

He goes on, “Christianity is understood now by all who profess the doctrines of the Church as a supernatural miraculous revelation of everything which is repeated in the Creed. By unbelievers it is regarded as an illustration of man’s craving for a belief in the supernatural, which mankind has now outgrown, as an historical phenomenon . . . and no longer has any living significance for us. The significance of the Gospel is hidden from believers by the Church, from unbelievers by Science.”

According to Tolstoy, Jesus did not teach any supernatural or otherworldly doctrines, but simply a new theory of life which people could try and test for themselves to see if it was true. Only as time went on and misunderstandings grew, were supernatural authorities added to the arguments. He sees the ways in which the Gospels, book of Acts, and the Epistles stray ever further from the simplicity of Jesus’ teachings as a demonstration of “how from the earliest times the non-comprehension of the doctrine called forth the need for proofs through the miraculous and incomprehensible,” leading eventually to the dogmas and creeds which have been handed down through the ages.

Tolstoy said that believers have been betrayed by inheriting a corrupt religious tradition. Those of a rational turn of mind are well-justified in rejecting these distortions, but in so doing, they misunderstand what religion can and ought to be.

For Tolstoy, religion is a developmental resource in advancing in maturity to new, more inclusive views of life. He says that all religions are based on one of three basic views: “First, embracing the individual, or animal view of life; second,

embracing the society, or the pagan view of life; third, embracing the whole world, or the divine view of life.

“In the first theory of life a man’s life is limited to his one individuality; the aim of life is the satisfaction of the will of this individuality. In the second theory of life a man’s life is limited not to his own individuality, but to certain societies and classes of individuals: to the tribe, the family, the clan, the nation; the aim of life is limited to the satisfaction of the will of those associations of individuals. In the third theory of life a man’s life is limited not to societies and classes of individuals, but extends to the principle and source of life – to God. . . . and to fulfill the will of God he is ready to sacrifice his individual and family and social welfare. The motor power of his life is love. And his religion is the worship in deed and in truth of the principle of the whole.”

He says, “To learned men the doctrine of non-resistance to evil by force is exaggerated and even irrational. Christianity is much better without it, they think, not observing closely what Christianity, as represented by them, amounts to.

“They do not see that to say that the doctrine of non-resistance to evil is an exaggeration in Christ’s teaching is just like saying that the statement of the radii of a circle is an exaggeration in the definition of a circle. And those who speak thus are acting precisely like a man who, having no idea of what a circle is, should declare that this requirement, that every point of the circumference should be an equal distance from the center, is exaggerated. To advocate the rejection of Christ’s command of non-resistance to evil, or its adaptation to the needs of life, implies a misunderstanding of the teachings of Christ.”

Tolstoy’s conversion to this radical humanistic form of Christian pacifism was so complete that he renounced his fortune, much to the chagrin of his wife, who had no similar conversion and fought for and won control of his estate. For the rest of his life, Tolstoy lived simply on a communal farm in the country.

For those who think his positions too extreme, bear in mind that they’re not too far from the mainstream of Quaker thought. It might help, too, to realize

that there is a direct line of Christian pacifism that leads from Adin Ballou to Leo Tolstoy to Mohandas Gandhi to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Sometimes would-be reformers look to Gandhi and King – both disciples of Tolstoy’s – and wonder how they accomplished so much while others struggle in vain. We might all benefit from taking this Gospel of radical humanism to heart.

This is the Gospel which led Gandhi to say, “There is no way to peace. Peace is the way,” and “We must be the change we want to see in the world.” This is the Gospel which empowered Dr. King to share his dream of a world transformed by peaceful means.

Tolstoy criticized the would-be revolutionaries of his day for their turgid dreams of violent overthrow of the government. He said that violence corrupts immediately and inevitably. He told them to look to Jesus as the example of a true revolutionary. He said, “The true revolutionary lives as though the revolution had already taken place.”

If we want happiness and peace in the world, are we strong enough to be happy and peaceful ourselves? They are easy to hope for, but harder to attain. Instead, we often use our time and energy complaining about why we aren’t happy, or being angry about the lack of peace.

“The true revolutionary lives as though the revolution had already taken place.” What would our lives, our homes, our church, our country and world be like if we lived that way?